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SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
HOLYOKE

INFORMANT: ALICE COADY
INTERVIEWER: CHRISTINE H. BAILEY
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I = CHRISTINE H. BAILEY
C = ALICE COADY

SG-HO-T313

[There is lots of background noise, including music and people's voices]

I: This is uh September the twenty-ninth, 1988, and we're at the Massachusetts Folklife Festival at Heritage State Park, and we're talking with Alice Coady, C-O-A-D-Y, of North Adams, about her working life. Alice, first of all I want to thank you for joining us and I know we're going to be competing against all the folk music behind us but (- -) [both laugh] As we explained to you we're working on a project called Shifting Gears which is has been looking at the changing meaning of work in Massachusetts. And Uh I'd like to ask you some questions relating to your working life, but first perhaps could you just give us a brief ehh biographical uh sketch of where you were born and (- -)

C: I was born in North Adams. I've lived in North Adams all my life. Uhhh, that's it. My only job I had always worked in North Adams with a few years I didn't work. But uhh I still lived in North, [laughs then interviewer laughs] I still lived in Adams. And I'm a grandmother. (I: And you're a grandmother) Grandmother to nineteen. (I: Nineteen!) Yeah. (Good heavens!) And I have eight children. (I: Yeah, you have eight children) Yeah. (I: Uh huh) And I ended up bringing them up alone and working to support them, but I did it, and come out on top, so (I: Uh huh) now I spend, now I don't work any more. (I: Um hm) Still retired two years ago. I do uh volunteer work. I work in a tourist booth, (I: Uh huh) one day a week. A-a-nd I do work with the different veterans' agencies. Go to down Northhampton in it. (I: Okay) Keep busy.

I: Ehh, is your background um French Canadian, Irish? Where did your parents come from?

C: French and Yankee. (I: French and Yankee) Um, my father's mother was, come from an old Yankee family. Upper New York State. The name was Snow. (I: Uh huh) My four grandparents were born in the United States but their, all their people originally come from

France, and some further away than that. (I: Uh huh!) The [aunts]. And um my father was born in New York State, my mother in Adams. So French and Yankee. [laughs] (I: Uh huh)

I: And your husband, what did he do?

C: Uh he was um, we're divorced now, but he was born in Scotland. He come over (I: Uh huh) as a baby. (I: Uh huh) Uh, course my mother-in-law was born in Scotland. She's still hanging around. (I: Oh!) [interviewer laughs] Eighty-nine, (I: Yes!) you ought to see her! She's great! [laughs] (I: Ahh)

I: When did you first go to work?

C: I went to work at sixteen years old in the [Hoosic] Cotton Mill. (I: Uh huh) I couldn't get to work fast enough. I loved it! (I: Uh huh) And I um started off uh making bobbins, bobbin winder (I: A bobbin winder) as they called it. (I: Uh huh) And at that time there was uh the [Hoosic] Cotton Mill but we worked in rayons. A lot of rayon. And fact we also made parachute cloth (I: Oh!) during the war. (I: During the war, uh huh) Aaand uhh I worked three years there. Did a little bit of every thing, (I: Sixteen to nineteen) but mostly a bobb-, worked mostly in the winding room. (I: Um hm) And then later on when they had new winders we went down in the weave shed, and we filled and also made bobbins. And then I uh got married. (I: Uh huh) So I didn't work for quite a few years. (I: Uh huh) Bring up my family.

I: L-l-let's, let's go back a bit there. When y-, when you said you were very excited to get, to work in the mill, wh-, (C: I loved it!) wh-, why? Were all your friends going into the mill?

C: No it was just, seemed as a way of life (I: Yeah) there. I didn't want to continue in school. (I: Um hm) I finally got my GED about three years ago. [laughs] (I: Very good, congratulations) And I was working at the same time and going to (I: Uh huh) school nights. But you do, you learn on the job, too. (I: Um hm) So you're learning something all the time.

I: And how many hours a day did you work? Do you remember?

C: Uhhh, [pauses] it come to eight hours uh by the end of the week. Forty hours a week for forty cents an hour! (I: Ohh!) We used to go in from uh six to one, and then the other shift from one to ten (I: Uh huh) or something like that. (I: Uh huh) But I liked it. (I: Yeah)

I: Did you meet your husband in the mill?

C: N-nooo, I met him, he was home on leave from the Navy, (I: Uh huh) and I met him at a, at a show they had one of theaters. [laughs] (I: Uh huh)

I: Did you have any family members that worked in the mill with you?

C: Well my father had worked in the mill years ago. My mother did for a short time (I: Uh huh) before she was married. But um it was just my grandparents worked in mills. (I: Huh) It

was just, we're mill people! (I: Yeah)

I: That's what, was it, that's what was expected of you, to go in the mill?

C: Yeah, but I mean I, I could have gone through high school. I mean, I wasn't (I: Yeah) forced into it. (I: Uh huh) I wanted to! (I: Uh huh) And I would still like to if I was young! (I: Yeah) You know I could still (- -)

I: Did you like it in the mill? (C: I loved it) Yeah? What did you like about it?

C: It was just, just like that. I had a, I had an excellent boss, (I: Uh huh) and I worked three years for the sa-, for that same man. (I: Uh huh) And then uh, got married, and I didn't have time to work in the mills. (I: Ohh)

I: So when you got married, you quit as soon as you got married or just before?

C: C: Ahh (- -) (I: Do you remember?) Soon as I got married. (I: You did) Yeah. (I: Uh huh) Yeah. I had, at that time you had to, it was during the war, so you had to give notice. In fact, I went in to another place one week before and I had to, you had to get uhhh, permission to switch your job from one place to another. [laughs] (I: Uh huh) That was rough but I worked I think about ten days on that other job. I was working uh, that was a woolen mill, (I: Uh huh; s-s-so y-, so when y, wh- (- -)) and I was a spinner (- -)

I: Okay, so, so when you, when you, when you got married, you didn't go back to work for three years.

C: Ah, about nineteen years. (I: Nineteen years) Yeah, and then I worked into uh Sprague's Electric, and made condensers. (I: Uh huh) [I packed]. But I didn't care for it. It wasn't my kind of work. And then uh we were laid off there and went to work in this other place which was making uhhh [pauses] r-rucksacks and things for the Army. (I: uh huh) And then from there we made, that's where I met Evelyn [unclear]. Went from there, made rucksacks. Did everything, from packing. We ended up working the sleeping bags from the cutting table, sewing, worked in feathers, stuffing the sleeping bag with feathers. Worked with down, feathers. Made uhh, we worked in glue. Uhh, from there all kinds of things (I: Uh huh) for the Army. (I: Uh huh) And I loved it. (I: Uh huh) It was t-, rough at times. By that time of course our wage was a little bit more. A lot of it was um, got a little bit rough sometimes though, because the more you made you know. It was bonus work. (I: Uh huh) And then uh I ended up um on the sewing machine. First where you learn how to do a single needle machine, you learn how to do other kind of machine. So I have worked everything. And I ended up working uh, [unclear] after those places, and every place I went to work they either went bankrupt, (I: Uh huh) or something, so you'd just turn around and get another job. (I: Yeah) But uh working on uh that kind of work was my kind of work. (I: Uh huh)

I: Whey, whey, how did you get a job in Sprague Electric? Do you remember?

C: Just applied for it. (I: Just applied for it?) Yeah. It took me a little while to get a job in

there because to me there was a little bit of clique there. (I: Yeah) So I mean one of my neighbors, [unclear] my family, he went in one day and he told them "Give this woman a job. She'll learn it." And, my attitude toward the work, I could learn it. (I: Uh huh, uh huh) And most of the time there was only a couple people, only a couple bosses all through that time that you couldn't get along with.

I: Do you remember when this was? That you went to work at Sprague?

C: Nineteen ssss-, wait a minute, nineteen sixty-five. (I: 1965) Yeah. [I went to work] and my youngest one was just five years old. (I: Uh huh)

I: And you didn't like it.

C: I did not like (I: What, what , what) my work at Sprague. (I: Was there you didn't like about it, do you remember?)

I: It was cold somehow. I had a, my, a, one of my supervisors was good but it was uh, if you were low man on the totem pole you just didn't have a chance. (I: Uh huh) So after eleven months of that when I was laid off (- -)

I: Wh-what exactly did you do there? Make it (- -)

C: I made condensers.

I: Okay. What does that mean?

C: I-, it involved, you had a machine in front of you and it involved rolling different kinds of paper, craft paper and foil and put it, and just roll them up so many turns for this, and then you're put a shovel in to [put] the ends in it. (I: Uh huh) But it wasn't my kind of thing.

I: Did you find it uh, uh boring, is that what it was?

C: Uh just didn't like it. (I: Just didn't like it) Because i-if you didn't get you, it, it, it w-was such that if your uh the rolls of craft paper, if they were [batting them there], you had square rolls what we used to call them. So uh if that was all that was left to work with, your condenser did not read right, so you got the blame. But what the heck could you do? (I: Yeah) And some of them they used to, we called them [mandrill] uh when you roll your, start rolling your paper you had a little metal piece that way and the other piece would fit in that way, if you put it on and you'd go so many rolls. Well, this particular part, if one of the other night, day shift, we were working on nights, took that home or give you, or left you a bent one, there was no way could that condenser roll up. I just didn't like it. (I: Um hm) It was dog eat dog. (I: Yeah, yeah) And that's a different kind of a thing.

I: Were you on bonus work then?

C: It was supposed to be bonus but I never got to where (- -) [laughs]

I: So you never got to bonus. [laughs]

C: Never got to first base on it. (I: Uh huh, uh huh) I just did not like it. (I: Wasn't you) And so (- -)

I: So you were laid off. Do you remember why?

C: The whole place was slack. (I: The whole place was slack) Yep. (I: Yeah) And then I went to work in the other place uhh (- -)

I: What was the other place again?

C: I was uh, what did they first call Mohawk Industry? [laughs] We went fr-, we went from one name to another one, but I, I liked it.

I: And what work were you doing there?

C: Well, let's see I started off putting straps on the racks which you hold the backpack on. (I: I see) And uh it was dirty work, but it was give and take. You worked like hell, you played like hell, you fought like hell, but y-y-you were treated like a human being. (I: Yeah) And we had our battles throughout the year, but on the whole, it was great.

I: You mean, we management you mean? [Were they strict?]

C: I never really had too much uh trouble with management, on the whole. Once they uh, that, that was the, the difference which I found out later on, too. If you did your work, (I: Um hm) once you got your reputation made in that place, you were known by what you were. And uh once you got it, if you had an argument you could argue back without getting (I: Yeah) fired (I: Mm) so (- -) (I: Yeah) Y-you could put your work in and do it. It wasn't a cold-blooded thing (I: Um hm) which I found later on (I: Yeah) at other places I worked. (I: Uh huh)

I: How did you find this job? In, which, [both talk] I didn't catch the name of the mill.

C: Asked for it.

I: I didn't catch the name of (- -)

C: I went in and asked for it. Oh, what did they call the mill first when it first come to North Adams? [chuckling] I don't know. (I: What is it now?) We changed. It's out. [laughs] (S: Okay what was it (- -)) It went from (I: What was the name of it?) there to Inflated roducts. (I: Inflated Products, uh huh) And to, then from there they went out, they went bankrupt, and then they opened another place. Which come first [Cecile] or Mohawk? [Cecile]. [Jape]. We [someone in background says "[Cecile]? Mohawk"] went up [Cecile] (- -) [person in background continues, "Mohawk, Mohawk wasn't it? Yeah"] Was it Mohawk first? [person in background adds something unintelligible about Mohawk] You just ought to make we went

from one place to another. [person in background continues conversation with interviewer] Yeah. [Exdial]. [person in background says something unintelligible] [Exdial] was the worst place! It went from Mohawk to [Cecile]. [Cecile] was great. I had a boss which reminded me of my first boss. And um I used to attach uh, the main job there was uh connecting the back parts, the different parts of sleeping bags (I: Uh huh) to another. Or I would have to go over and do the overlock stitch on the ends of the bag. But those kind of places you learn not only your own job, you learn the different steps along the way. You learn the whole thing. Which made it more interesting. (I: Uh huh) You were not stuck doing this one thing. (I: Uh huh) For days at a time.

I: Which you were at Spraje, Sprague Electric. That's what you were doing. (C: Sprague Electric) The one thing.

C: I doing one thing. (I: Uh huh)

I: So i-, so (C: And uh) you really got, you went back to the textile mill kind of thing, work? (I: Yeah) In a way.

C: Mmm, yeah, (I: [In the mill]) in one way I guess you could call it textile mill because on the sleeping bag like I said I sew it on them. Different kinds of mahines. (I: Um hm) Working on them. Helped out the Cutting Department. We packed. We cleaned. We, we [laughs] mended. (I: Um hm) [keeps laughing]

I: So you were involved (C: Dy-) in the whole process?

C: Yeah, I loved it. I liked it. It was my kind of work. But like I said (- -)

I: And then what happened when you left that job? And why did you leave that job?

C: Well they went out. (I: They went out) So we went into another place similar to it. (I: Uh huh, and (- -)) Mohawk, (S: How did you find it?) uh Mohawk Industries uh that particular time they were working on tents. Hospital tents. And most of my job there was um, well I started out inspecting the tents, the final inspection, but that was rough because these things were huge. Something like this when they're made up. So then I went in the other room and I uh attached the front of, the metalware to the front. (I: Uh huh) And I did some working on uh machines which uh put your overlock stitch around the screens before they were sewed on to the tent. (I: Oh I see) So it was good work. (I: Uh huh) So then we, that was when it went out right? [person in background responds] Then Mohawk went out (- -) [person in background says "I don't know, I didn't work for Mohawk"] Yeah, Mohawk went out and I stayed out of work for a while. Then I uh went to, oh I did some uh couple months work under the Green Thumb Program in an office but I (- -)

I: Now what's the Green Thumb Program?

C: Uh, that was one from the Massachusetts. (I: Uh huh) One of them uh (I: Uh huh) programs. (I: Wha- (- -)) Where you were work twenty hours (I: Uh huh) a week. I worked in

the respite program. I liked it but it, I couldn't live on that, and I wanted (I: Yeah) to get back to the other w-, kind of work. (I: Yeah) So I went to work for this place called [Exdial] and I don't mind getting dirty, (I: Yeah) I don't mind sweating, (I: Yeah) but that was the worst place I ever worked. (I: Huh) Finally I, [both laugh] I, I had it [unclear]. They went out after I got fired, but I you know I hated it.

I: What kind of work did you do?

C: Because (- -) It was about, [pause: 3 sec.] we were making part, we were sewing on gas masks, or the, and (M: Uh) asbestos. Boy, that's one thing, we did work on asbestos. I got out there. But anyhow we were working, I was doing the topstitching. You take like a helmet, it's got two seams, you know it's got two sides and n-, and they would sew on the outside. Well you had to topstitch that on the inside and if it didn't show up on the right on the outside, and you've got these young chicks that were [unclear]. They got people off the street which told us what we had known all our lives. (M: Uh huh) Do our jo-, and if you didn't make uh, if they had it on computer there, if the computer said that this person could put out fifty an hour, or ten (M: Yeah) minutes, (M: Yes) everybody was supposed to. There was no human element in it. (M: Uh huh!) So finally I ended up bargaining with it. I got warning slips, so I tore them, I laughed at them. (I: Uh huh) And I never had problems with getting along with anybody. (I: Yeah) So finally they went out of, they went out completely. So uh I think it was about that time, what the heck did I do next? Oh, I stayed out a while. Then I went to work (- -) Uh, this new place started up. In fact, this time my boss, an old boss of mine called me up (I: Um hm) and asked me if I wanted the job. So I went to work and I was working on uh, you've heard of Country Curtains? (I: Um hm) And this was a factory from Plymouth, Mass. (I: Um hm) They were a good company. And I was uh working on the [ovelot] machine. That's a machine which would do uh, like this. (I: Oh, I see) [both talk] And (I: (- -) sew the seams) I was working on the ruffles. But there again we had a young supervisor. Some of these fast ones on the job decided that they were, they could do it. They were going to push everybody and that's where was the pressure on me. (I: Uh huh) So when I got the warning slip, after all those years (I: Yeah) I never got warning slips in my life! (I: Yeah) I liked working [elly]. So when I got the warning slip I just up (I: Yeah) and quit. (I: Yeah, yeah) That was it! (I: Yeah) For work. But I still say I, I'd like it if I would ever go back, I would like textile work. There's a difference (I: Um hm) because uhh you get these new ones in these jobs, there's no human element. Everybody, they don't take and figure that some people are faster than others, or some people are slower than others. But the slower person can actually come out and do a better job where you wouldn't have to handle the product (I: Right) twice. (I: Right, right) And you were treated like a human being. That's, (I: Yeah, yeah) that's the way (I: Yeah) industry has changed to me. (I: Yeah, it has) So now, like I said I uh do a lot of volunteer (I: Uh huh) work. (I: Uh huh). I don't work no more. [laughs] (I: Keep busy, right) I keep busy. (I: Yeah)

I: Well, thank you very much Mrs. (C: Oh, your very welcome!) Coady for sharing that with us. And uh if you were a couple minutes later get a really cold day or something, my old bosses all knew that they would allow for that. They wouldn't say anything! But what took the cake was when it, when I was working in [Exdial], this young chick there, she finally got fired couple weeks after, few weeks after I (I: Uh huh) got through, and one morning I went in, it was the coldest day of the winter. I went to work and when I got, I used to wear these leggings

sometimes, when I got in work uh couple minutes late, I was frozen so I said "Aw heck, I'm going to have a cup of coffee." My old bosses wouldn't have said anything about it no matter where I, they worked. So I decided to have a cup of coffee because my card wasn't in the lot anyhow. She had taken, the, the supervisor, young chick, she made money, not the supervisor, it was a m-, a group worker. She made money. The more you made, the more she made. (I: Right!) It (I: Right) was an insult. So she hollered at me, she uh come out you know, I was having a cup of coffee, and I don't know you go back to [write] but give me my card. So I got my card, I punched in and I started watching my machine with my cup of coffee. She hollered "Take that, get rid of that coffee!" Where the hell do you want me to put it, in my pocket? (I: Yeah, yeah) So that was it. I got transferred downstairs. I got along good downstairs, but it was a cold-blooded place. (I: Yeah, yeah) The people worked there b-after (I: It's too bad) they said the same thing. (I: Yeah) But they went out of business, too. [laughing] Evelyn, I'm going to be walking ar- (- -)

[end of interview]